McNair, A. (2019). *A meaningful mess: A teacher's guide to student-driven classrooms, authentic learning, student empowerment, and keeping it all together … without losing your mind.* **Prufrock Press.**

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Part workbook, part pep talk, part chat in the teachers' lounge, *A Meaningful Mess* is a practitioner's guide that attempts to explain why Gen Z deserves a new approach to schooling, and what teachers can do to adapt their practices. A former classroom teacher turned author and consultant, Andi McNair passionately urges teachers to rethink their perceptions of Gen Z learners, redesign classroom experiences, and use technology to spark critical thinking. Messy learning is unpredictable and allows students to take control over what they do at school. Examples of meaningfully messy learning include genius hour, makerspace, virtual reality experiences, and connecting with other classrooms around the globe.

Gen Z wants to know the intent behind classroom activity and is quicker to resist than comply. McNair's research indicates that students born between 1995 and 2014 have an 8-second attention span and consume media on an average of five different screens. This
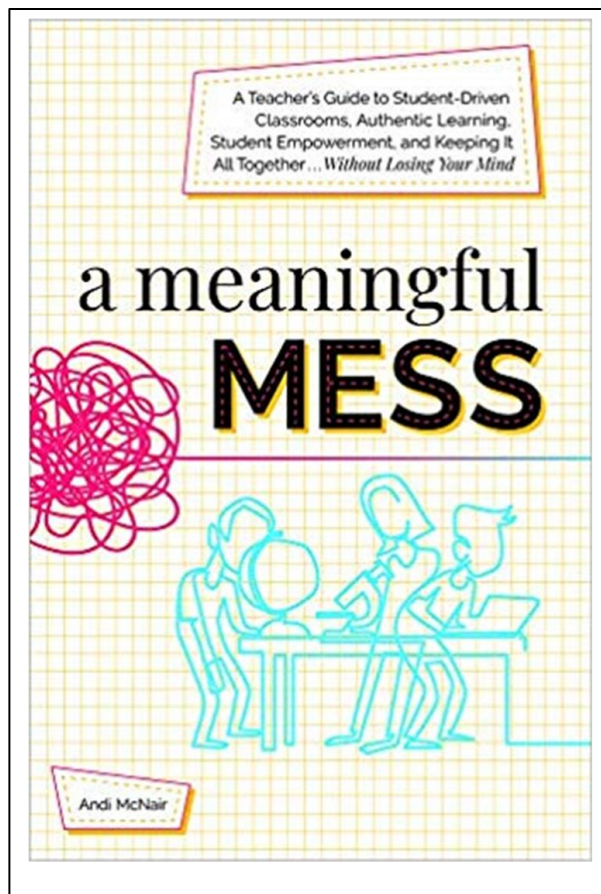
age group connects to technology constantly, is accustomed to instant feedback, and does not like to wait. As information is accessible on cell phones and tablets, Gen Z deserves more from schooling than surface-level learning. If a Google search provides the answer, teachers are asking the wrong question. Instead, students should have low-risk opportunities to learn from failure, share what they learn, and pursue their passions.

Teachers can empower students by releasing control. In McNair's words, "I know from experience that when students drive the learning, they become more curious, begin to ask more questions, and oftentimes will surprise you with their willingness and ability to figure things out" (p. 50). Teachers can rethink classroom rules to instill trusting relationships and turn the classroom into a space that belongs to students. When McNair informed her students that nothing in the room was off limits, students understood she held them to a higher standard.

Lesson plans do not control learning in a student-centered classroom. Teachers instead create classroom experiences using "the 3Es" (p. 73): engage, experience, empower. Engagement can take the form of asking students to watch a video before class or share vacation photos that connect the classroom to their lives. While student engagement is essential to messy and meaningful learning, I find McNair's suggestions misaligned with students' 8-second attention span, use of multiple screens, and resistance to comply. Of more concern is *which* students bring photos to class. Students might not have photos of smiling family members standing in front of a three-dimensional shape far from home. A more egalitarian discussion focuses on the differences between activity and experience. Students complete an activity. An experience, however, is an event that students remember. Empowering experiences make learners feel confident. Examples include students sharing what they read on social media, blogging, and arranging student-led conferences.

Another theme is reflection. Teachers should stop teaching bell-to-bell and give students time at the end of class to reflect on what they learned. Students can reflect via blogging, and teachers can model in-depth reflection by responding with probing questions. As Gen Z can be unwilling to comply, missing from the conversation are suggestions beyond blogging, or positive ways to encourage a student who resists reflective thinking in writing.

Teachers talking about what students already know is futile. Instead, students ought to spend school hours learning something new, and learn by doing something. Unfortunately, constructive activities tend to be enrichment, available when students successfully complete worksheets or answer questions at the end of the chapter. Two solutions are genius hour and makerspaces. Genius hour is dedicated time to find a creative solution to a personally meaningful problem. Makerspaces are physical environments for problem solving, with more focus on the use of analog (e.g., a screwdriver) and technical (e.g., a 3D printer) tools. Although McNair shares online resources and references to other texts, the discussions about how to introduce genius hour and establish a makerspace lack grounding in why these are good practices. I am unconvinced that teachers' job satisfaction will transform with little more than a warning that things will get messy. Teachers can help students develop opportunities for service learning or invent something new, but not without a firm background in constructivist teaching and learning. A more satisfactory discussion would include additional references to pedagogical research, classroom vignettes from diverse perspectives, and photos of student projects in process.

The author concludes with a plea to do things differently, building on Gen Z's dispositions toward schooling. Teachers cannot engage Gen Z using what worked for Gen X. To be meaningfully messy, teachers

can rekindle their passion by connecting with likeminded educators and sharing their stories. Communities of sharing can happen through blogging, posting to social media, or conferencing face-to-face.

A Meaningful Mess is intended for classroom teachers discontented with rote, sit-and-get instruction. The colloquial style makes for fast and easy reading. The positive tone and workbook format make *A Meaningful Mess* an appropriate choice for professional learning communities. The book includes ample space to interact with the text using fill-in boxes for teachers to engage, empower, and reflect. The prompts, however, focus more on thought than action. One prompt is to consider how students can find relevance in the upcoming week's instruction. A different approach could be a request to jot down three upcoming classroom activities students could connect to their lives outside of school. Then, keep the book closed until those three opportunities come to fruition. The book could include a second box to write down what connections students made and how they affected learning.

A Meaningful Mess aligns with *Worlds of Making: Best Practices for Establishing a Makerspace for Your School* (Fleming, 2015), a book intended for school media specialists that praises experiential learning in a light-hearted tone. *Worlds of Making* provides photos, stories from multiple schools, and connections to Common Core Standards. Teachers desiring research that supports student-driven learning could turn to *Invent to Learn: Making, Tinkering, and Engineering in the Classroom* (Martinez & Stager, 2013). This latter work provides a history of progressive education, descriptions of learning theories, and clear advice to determine what makes a good student project. Although intended more for informal spaces, *The Art of Tinkering* (Wilkinson & Petrich, 2013) communicates similar goals in a stunning format. Printed in conductive ink, tinkerers can use the book itself to play with circuitry and build simple machines.

In *A Meaningful Mess*, I found practical suggestions to make classroom experiences more memorable. I urge, however, teachers working in diverse communities to consider further reading. The dominant culture prevails over the text, with not one mention of students' cultural backgrounds. McNair explains how Gen Z is less collaborative than Millennials with a story about learning to ski. She compares surface learning to deeper understanding by describing the difference between snorkeling and scuba diving. In the United States, Whites represent 72% of skiers (Brown, 2017) and 77% of scuba divers (Sport & Fitness Industry Association, 2015). While 80% of public school teachers are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), half of public school students are not (de Brey et al., 2019).

I suggest that teachers interested in creating student-driven and culturally responsive classrooms turn to Ladson-Billings (2017). Both McNair and Ladson-Billings confront Gen Z's demands to know why they must learn certain things and encourage giving students more control over what is important to know. McNair mentions two of her students' worthy pursuits, (1) a 5k race to raise funds for an animal shelter; and (2) students sewing pillowcases for hospitalized children. While both are of valid concern, Ladson-Billings asserts that culturally relevant teachers help students create projects that "pose powerful questions about social, cultural, economic, political, and other problems of living in a democracy that attempts to serve a diverse populace" (p. 146). She mentions a teacher who led students to capture stories of disabled veterans. Seeing that her students came from communities plagued with drug violence, the teacher noticed a desensitization to community members dying early. By interacting with elderly people, the teacher brought students to an understanding that people can lead longer lives.

An educator should care about *A Meaningful Mess* because the world outside of

school does not motivate Gen Zs to stretch their attention spans or interact with fewer screens. As today's students will multi-task, teachers can exhaust themselves keeping students on-task, or engage them in multiple paths to learning. Students deserve more from schooling, and teachers deserve to do more than dish out information. This text might reignite a teacher's passion, but real change cannot happen without mindfulness of diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

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